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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/PPD, NEA/P, IIP/G/NEA

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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [SOCI](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: ELECTRIFYING THE SULTANATE

[¶11.](#) Summary: The Omani Internet message board "al-Sablah" is the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language forum for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, this popular site nevertheless offers a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

-- Corruption Scandal Involving The National Electric Company
-- Comments By Iran's President
-- Arab Rulers As Puppets
-- Opening Of An Omani Consulate In Melbourne
-- Alleged Demonstration By Physically Disabled In Saham

End summary.

A Current Affair

[¶12.](#) With a record number of hits (16,832) and responses (174), the conviction and sentencing of 31 individuals involved in a bribery/corruption scandal at the National Electricity Company was a major topic of discussion among al-Sablah members. The story was all the more sensational given the high level of some of the defendants, including a former undersecretary at the Ministry of Electricity and Water and Oman's former ambassador to the United Kingdom. Most al-Sablah respondents hailed the trial, with one calling it "a victory for transparency." Others took the opportunity to vent against official corruption: "These sentences will set a precedent that will force others to think twice before exploiting their positions." Added another contributor, "This unfortunately is not the only breach of trust that has occurred in our beloved country, but we hope that government officials will learn from the mistakes of the convicted."

[¶13.](#) The issue of how the crimes were actually discovered -- by an international auditing firm rather than a local entity -- touched off another round of comments. "The State Financial Audit Authority proved its ineffectiveness, and we had to rely on outsiders to expose the mess," criticized one author. Another wrote, "An international auditing company can find examples of fraud and cheating from thousands of miles away, but our own agencies can't detect it? How embarrassing." Still others worried about the broader implications of the sentencing: "Was our Ambassador to the UK honest when he was representing Oman in London? Or was he working to get better deals for British companies?

Cartography, Iranian-Style

[¶14.](#) Recent inflammatory comments by Iran's president received broad support among al-Sablah's readers. Out of 1,200 hits and 48 responses, most participants agreed with President Ahmedinejad's call to "wipe Israel off the map." "I wish I were an Iranian," commented one author, "because none of the Arab leaders would dare to say what the Iranian president did." Continued another, "God bless Iran's president for vocalizing what we all are thinking. If only Arab leaders were so bold." One respondent, however, urged caution, saying "The Iranian president may be betting on the losing horse in this instance."

Made in America

[¶15.](#) One forum member aired his opinions about Washington's ostensible control over Arab leaders: "There is a new trend in American policy now, to try and identify future Arab leaders in order to influence them. In the past, America simply used bribes or other means to put Arab leaders in its pocket, but now they are looking more and more at young people."

[¶16.](#) 237 individuals viewed the topic, and 17 responded - mostly agreeing with the author. "Arab leaders are always trying to please their American masters, as we have seen," claimed one respondent. Another wrote, "It seems the Bush administration is fed up with simply giving orders to Arab leaders, and now wants to 'educate' and 'prepare' our rulers for us." Still another observed, "The problem for the Americans is that the Arab

educational system does not create puppets. Therefore, the Americans are trying to influence the upbringing of future leaders, in an effort to make them traitors to their own countries."

The Sultanate In Sydney

17. The news that Sultan Qaboos issued a royal decree establishing an Omani consulate in Melbourne, Australia was welcomed by al-Sablah readers (with 124 hits and 7 responses). One participant noted, "In view of the increasing number of Omani students who are choosing to attend universities in Australia and New Zealand, opening this consulate is a good idea." Remarked another, "For a long time, Omani students in Australia and even Malaysia needed to rely on Oman's embassy in London for services and formalities. This new consulate will certainly make it easier for students."

Stirrings In Saham?

18. In a posting that received 287 hits but virtually no responses, one forum member reported on an alleged demonstration by physically disabled Omanis in Saham (near the city of Sohar, northwest of Muscat). This reporter claimed to see "a group of disabled persons, mostly men, gathering on their wheelchairs near the Royal Camp in Saham, demanding to meet the Sultan. They were asking for more job opportunities for the handicapped in both the public and private sectors. A security officer in charge of the site denied them access to His Majesty."

BALTIMORE